

The *Elle-iad*: female empowerment in the *Iliad*

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Emma Greensmith takes a fresh look at the women in Homer's *Iliad* and finds that, despite living in what seems to be the ultimate man's world of war and politics, they have a subtle and powerful part to play.

'Go back to the house...War will be the men's concern'

Iliad 6, 490–4

When Hector speaks these words to his wife Andromache at the end of their meeting at the walls of Troy, modern female readers may be excused for feeling a sense of disappointment, frustration, and exclusion. For all his love and respect for his wife, Hector cannot include her in his world of war – to protect her, and the women of Troy, he must bar her from the pressing realities that he is facing. Many readers may want to rage against this injustice – for superficially it seems that just as Hector shuts out Andromache, so Homer shuts out all the female characters in his epic world; that the *Iliad* details masculine conflict, masculine ego, and masculine power, in a world in which women do little more than watch and weep.

However if we take a closer look at the subtleties in Homer's portrayal of the females in this poem, an alternative, empowering reading emerges. In this reading, the *Iliad* becomes just as much a women's story as a men's one, and the words of Hector with which we began can be taken almost as an ironic comment: because it becomes clear that Homer's leading ladies do not 'go back to the house', and that war is very much their concern.

Helen: war through a woman's eyes

Let us first take a look at Helen, a female character who boldly defies the gender divide which epic warfare tries to enforce. In book 3 we see Helen approach the Skaian Gates and discuss the war with Priam and some of the leading elders from the Trojan camp (lines 154–80: all translations here are modified from Hammond's Penguin version).

Now when they saw Helen coming upon the wall, they softly spoke

winged words one to another: 'It is small blame that the Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans should for a long time suffer woes for such a woman; wondrously like is she to the immortal goddesses to look upon. But even so... let her depart upon the ships, not to be left here to be a destruction to us and to our children after us.' So they said, but Priam spoke, and called Helen to him: 'Come here, dear child, and sit before me, so that you may see your former lord and your kinsfolk and your people—you are in no way to blame in my eyes; it is the gods, I think, that are to blame, who roused against me the tearful war of the Achaeans – and so that you may tell me who is this huge warrior, this man of Achaea so valiant and so tall...'. And Helen, fair among women, answered him, saying: 'Revered are you in mine eyes, dear father of my husband, and dreadful. Would that evil death had been my pleasure when I followed your son here.... But that was not to be; so I pine away with weeping. However this will I tell you, what you ask and enquire. That man is the son of Atrous, wide-ruling Aga-memnon, both a noble king and a valiant spearman.'

We may first note the significance of Helen's very presence at this location: she is at the Skaian Gates of the city, the threshold of war, emphatically outdoors, able to hear the weapons clang and see the blood on the warriors' faces. By allowing her to climb the wall, Homer deliberately undercuts the inside/outside spatial separation of men and women that Hector's words to Andromache, with which we started, superficially uphold.

The Trojan elders' gossiping as Helen approaches also reminds us of her central role in starting the war itself. Whether Helen truly was the cause of the war and

all of its evils, or whether, as Priam suggests, the roots of the conflict go far deeper than a love triangle, is a complex question that merits discussion in its own right. Let it suffice to say here that the very fact that Helen, a woman, is perceived by many in the poem as the force which has caused all of these men to fight shows that Homer's women cannot be written off as subordinate characters: Helen is both spatially and dramatically in the thick of the action.

Straight after this passage, Helen describes the key warriors on both sides with pin-point accuracy: her emphasis on Agamemnon's physical strength ('a strong fighter with the spear'), but Odysseus's powerful way with words ('a master of all kinds of trickery and clever plans') prompts the agreement of Antenor, one of the elders, who replies 'my lady, what you have said is true indeed', and we as readers agree too: as the poem unfolds, we see many instances where her description of these warriors is backed up by their own actions, such as Agamemnon's aggressive stance in his quarrel with Achilles, and Odysseus's silver-tongued eloquence in the embassy sent to retrieve Achilles in book 9. Helen's insight into her male counterparts elevates her from a passive witness into a perceptive mouthpiece for the war itself. As Hanna Roisman put it, she is transformed from a silent weaver at the start of book 3, to a public speaker as the poem continues. In book 6, when she remarks that Zeus has created this misery 'so that in time to come we may be themes of song for future generations', Helen appears to speak for the whole of Troy, voicing a foresight shared by no one else but Homer himself.

Hecuba: a mother mourns her son

Important insights are also given to us by Hecuba, the long-suffering mother of Hector. When Hector briefly returns inside the gates of Troy in book 6, we witness a brief yet moving scene between mother and son (lines 254–62):

She clasped him by the hand and spoke and addressed him: 'My child, why have you left the fierce battle and come here? The sons of

the Achaeans, of evil name, must surely be pressing sore upon you as they fight about our city, and your heart has bid you to come here and lift up your hands to Zeus from the citadel. But stay till I have brought you honey-sweet wine so that you may pour libation to Zeus and the other immortals first, and you yourself shall enjoy it, if you will drink. When a man is spent with toil wine greatly restores his strength, even as you are spent with defending your kinsmen.'

In identifying the basic needs of her son – the need to pause, to pray, and to gain nourishment – Hecuba establishes herself as the archetypal mother. Rather like when Phoenix reminds Achilles about his childhood in book 9 (lines 490–1: 'many times you soaked the shirt on my chest with the wine you dribbled out in your baby helplessness'), in her devoted touch and her motherly fussing, Hecuba reinforces Hector's humanity by showing his vulnerability, reminding us that whilst he is a formidable warrior in battle, he is also still a child in his mother's eyes.

Hecuba's personification of motherhood reaches an emotional climax towards the end of the poem, when she learns of Hector's death at the hand of Achilles in book 22 (lines 430–6):

And among the women of Troy Hecuba led the vehement lamentation: 'My child, oh my misery! How shall I live in my sore anguish, now you are dead? – you who were my pride night and day in the city, and a blessing to all, both to the men and women of Troy throughout the town, whoever greeted you as a god; for truly you were to them a great glory, while you still lived; but now death and fate have come upon you.'

In the lead-up to and event of Hector's demise – Achilles' *aristeia* in his single-handed rout of the Trojans, the great chase, the final blow – we as readers have been preoccupied with the more physical, anatomical aspects of death. Here, in her piercing woe and her tearful recollections, Hecuba guides our emotional response to what has happened. It is hard to imagine that we could understand so clearly the poignant tragedy of Hector's short life without the emphatic, unrestrained loss evoked by the women closest to him, and above all by the woman who gave him the life that the gods did not allow him to keep.

Andromache: military advice and the war's price

We must finally turn our attention back to Andromache, with whom this discussion began. In the light of the important roles

and invaluable insight which we have now seen that Homer gives to his female characters, we can reread the conversation between Andromache and Hector at the Skaian Gates in a very different light.

In fact, far from being a reclusive, timid woman, Andromache displays in this scene a steely dominance and a ferocious intellect. Refusing to stay in the Temple of Athene with the other Trojan women, she races out to the wall, just like Helen in book 3, defiantly shunning the 'inside' realm normally associated with women. When she speaks with her husband, Andromache's words are as interesting and non-conforming as her actions (lines 429–39):

'Hector, you are to me father and queenly mother, you are my brother, and you are my steadfast husband. Come now, have pity, and remain here on the wall, lest you make your child an orphan and your wife a widow. And for your army, draw it up by the wild fig-tree, where the city may best be scaled, and the wall is open to assault. For three times at this point came the most valiant in company with the two Aiantes and glorious Idomeneus and the sons of Atreus and the valiant son of Tydeus, and they tried to enter: whether it be that one well-skilled in soothsaying told them, or by chance their own spirit urges and bids them to.'

By offering her husband detailed and precise military advice, Andromache proves false any notion of the Iliadic female being excluded from and ignorant of the world of war: she, like Helen, knows the names of the enemy troops ('the two Aiantes and glorious Idomeneus and the sons of Atreus and the valiant son of Tydeus'), she knows the history of the war so far ('for three times at this point'), and she even has suggestions for a solution. Therefore it is no coincidence that Andromache's name in Greek means 'battle of a man'.

Andromache's complexity is heightened by the merging of this military pragmatism with the heartfelt, worried pleas of a wife and mother. Hector and Andromache's tenderness towards their baby son Astyanax (lines 466–74) is one of the poem's most touching moments:

So saying, glorious Hector stretched out his arms to his boy, but the child shrank back into the bosom of his fair-girdled nurse, crying, frightened at the appearance of his dear father, and seized with dread of the bronze and the crest of horse-hair, as he saw it waving dreadfully from the top of his helmet. Both his dear father and queenly mother laughed aloud; and

forthwith glorious Hector took the helmet from his head and laid it all-gleaming upon the ground.

The image that Homer evokes of Andromache and Hector laughing together at the innocence of their child encapsulates the dualities that this scene lays bare: in this brutal, complicated war, a child evokes both laughter and tears from his parents, a warrior is both a fearsome fighter and an anxious husband-and-father, and a woman is both a military tactician and a hysterical soon-to-be widow.

Final thoughts

From the temptress Helen, to the maternal Hecuba, to the fiery yet sorrowful Andromache, Homer's women play a vital role in the story of the *Iliad*, and are crucial to constructing the 'song for future generations'. As we, the future generation, regard these Iliadic women, we may wonder why Homer would create a poem so rich in subtle feminine power when in his world, so far as we can tell, females played little or no prominent role.

Of course there is no definitive answer to this question. To me, perhaps the most persuasive solution is that Homer's *Iliad* is holding up a mirror not only to his own eighth-century B.C. society, but to any patriarchal society, of any 'future generation': a world where men play all the ostensible lead roles, but women are not as silent as they seem – they do not just observe, but understand; they do not just lament, but guide emotions; and they do not just obey their male counterparts, but steer them with invaluable insight: in short, they refuse to 'go back to the house'.

Emma Greensmith was an avid reader of Omnibus at school, and is about to start her MPhil and PhD in Classics at Cambridge: we look forward to seeing more articles by former readers!